

INDEXED
Δ
M3/B16
RA
75/24

**GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTS
DEPARTMENT
BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY**

DEVELOPMENT IN BOSTON

THE NEED FOR A PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

I

An Address Delivered by
Robert T. Kenney, Director
Boston Redevelopment Authority

Boston Society of Architects
Annual Dinner Meeting
November 19, 1975

It would be a pleasure for me to be able to stand up here tonight and announce several massive development programs that would fill all the drafting rooms of every architectural firm in the city. But I'm afraid that's just not the case. The BRA is working, albeit slowly, on major projects like South Station, Lafayette Place, the Charlestown Navy Yard, and yes, even Park Plaza, in addition to our 18 renewal projects.

But the development picture in Boston--while brighter than in most American cities--is still exceedingly cloudy and may become more so.

I don't want to be a messenger of gloom, but a quick look at the development situation today should give us pause.

The national market for public bonds is in chaos, and therefore, major public investment is uncertain.

The availability of private financing is also doubtful.

We have an unworkable Federal housing program, and our state housing finance agency can't sell its bonds

And even if financing is available, the development process has become so cumbersome that the risk inherent in development has been escalated to a point where it is all but impossible for developers to function.

- . There is the problem of rent control.
- . There are environmental regulations.
- . Taxes, as always, are burdensome.
- . And there is always the matter of community opposition.

It is no wonder that investors are buying government bonds and sitting back to collect their 8 or 9 percent interest. Few people in real estate development are getting that kind of return on their investments.

01 My job--fascinating as it is--brings me face-to-face with just how absurd the development process has become. In fact, just the other day I think we reached the ultimate absurdity. Jerome Rappaport, developer of Charles River Park and a patron of quality architecture, if there ever was one, sued under the environmental law to prevent construction of subsidized elderly housing adjacent to his project.

That's what I call prostitution of environmental regulations. And that's the kind of thing which has to change before the climate for development can improve.

Now I have no intention of attacking the environmental laws, however fashionable that may be. I happen to believe they are necessary and can be beneficial. But I also think we should realize that they can be used to stop development rather than to improve proposed development plans.

Which brings me to the main point of my talk: the difficulty of carrying out development today makes it necessary for architects and planners to shape more than just buildings.

They must also concern themselves with shaping the development process, including what resources can and will be made available to carry out new development.

And I want to put forward tonight a suggestion, one way architects and planners can begin to help shape and refine and improve the development process.

This city needs a broadly based committee of private citizens to provide rational advice and input on development decisions.

We at the BRA are constantly faced with resolving differences among competing developers, community groups, banks, en-

vironmentalists, politicians and others. It is a difficult task, and we welcome the challenge of trying to resolve the issues. However, at times it seems as if we only serve to unify competing factions as we become the common enemy.

What we need is a broadly based committee of private citizens that would be ongoing, that would provide a forum for discussing these issues intelligently and trying to resolve them --perhaps before they reach the point where we have a Pier Six brawl on our hands.

There is no such body in the city right now. The Real Estate Board is too narrow in its interests.

The Retail Trade Board is only concerned with what makes their cash registers ring.

The Chamber of Commerce has too many conflicting interests among its members.

That's why I think we must look to the architectural community as the foundation and base for this kind of group. We need your help in establishing a development process that is consistent, that is sensitive to the environment and at the same time sensitive to the realities of real estate development. We must improve a system that allows a competing developer to hold up 170 units of elderly housing when it is obvious that housing is needed and the project meets reasonable criteria.

I am thinking, I suppose, of a group similar to SPUR, the San Francisco Planning and Urban Renewal Association, funded by business but broadly based to embrace all groups concerned with development and change. SPUR periodically issues thoughtful and thoroughly researched position papers on critical issues.

Let me say that we have already asked CHPA (Citizens Housing and Planning Association) to serve as consultants in setting up a community review process for our downtown plan, but they also must broaden their following. I hope that relationship--along with the suggestion I am making tonight for involvement of the architectural community--can help bring about a process, a partnership, I should say, that is unique to Boston, that is no pale imitation of what's been done elsewhere.

I think the initial agenda for such a body would be an exploration of development priorities to ensure that we protect and preserve the priceless assets of this city, all the things that make Boston, Boston. Another agenda item is how we program our resources to obtain the greatest development impact.

I mention the preservation aspect because we at the BRA feel that our major task in the future is preventing what we have done for these past fifteen years--renewal.

We must act now to make sure that renewal is not necessary at some future date.

Somebody heard me say this the other day and said it sounded as if the BRA was turning into a preservation society. Well, when we say that the task facing the city is conservation and preservation, I am using the term in a context that goes beyond saving buildings of architectural or historic importance.

For example: We must preserve this city's triple-deckers. This is housing that is irreplaceable both for its viability as housing and because it represents a way for many working class families to become home owners.

Indeed, beyond preservation of the triple-decker housing stock, the stabilization of

owner-occupied, middle income housing should be a top priority of any development strategy in Boston.

We must work to preserve the neighborhood commercial centers of the city. With revenue sharing money, we have been working with local businessmen to provide them with organizational know-how and promotional skills. Off-street parking is being built. New lighting is being installed. Landscaping and other improvements are being carried out. Rebates on construction costs are being offered if a group of store owners will carry out improvements to their store fronts.

But the purpose of all this, I repeat, is to preserve what exists. These commercial centers are vital to the growth and stability of Boston's neighborhoods.

We must also look to the possibility of converting older commercial buildings downtown for use as housing. We have already shown on the waterfront that warehouses can be converted to housing. I think we should realize that some of these commercial structures can also be recycled, and do not have to end up as parking lots.

When I talk about conservation and preservation, I also include something we refer to very generally as the city's environmental quality.

Translated into specifics that means the North End, Chinatown, Back Bay and Beacon Hill. We must make sure that through zoning and other controls these neighborhoods are protected, not as museums, but as the areas of color and vitality and character they now are.

In that regard, something like the zoning amendment that created the adult entertainment zone is a good illustration of how we

can use zoning to make sure that blighting influences are kept out of our residential districts.

Conservation also means working to retain the city's traditional role as a center of culture and entertainment. Already we have been instrumental in the creation of the Boston Center for the Arts. In the Back Bay, we helped the ICA, which was homeless, find a new and exciting home in the old Back Bay Police Station. We have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to create a home for opera and ballet at the Music Hall if we can raise private funds to restore this facility.

Another unquestioned asset of this city is its natural pedestrian network, and that is something we must also preserve.

Our downtown is compact and walkable, and even though the automobile has made inevitable inroads on the pedestrian system, we can and are doing much to bring the balance back in favor of the pedestrian.

A \$12 million program of downtown pedestrian improvements has begun. Washington Street Mall is the keystone of this program, but its impact will be augmented by an extensive program of tree planting, landscaped plazas, sidewalk widenings, installation of street lighting and new street furniture in other areas.

Our aim, quite simply, is to make Boston one of the great cities of the world in terms of pedestrian convenience and enjoyment.

The automobile is not being banned in Boston. But, as much as possible, we are returning the streets to the people.

A year or so ago, for instance, the area around Faneuil Hall was a maze of traffic islands and pavement. Traffic was usually congested and pedestrians faced a real challenge

merely trying to cross the street. Today, we have a park in Dock Square. Traffic flows more smoothly, even though the streets have been narrowed and the traffic islands eliminated.

In the next few years we will be carrying out similar improvements around the Old State House and the Custom House and in other parts of the downtown where streets are too wide and sidewalks too narrow.

The area around the Central Artery itself is being landscaped to reduce its blighting effect on our environment.

Those are some of the general goals we should pursue under the over-all policy of preventing renewal.

But I don't want to imply in any way that we should not think about new development, only that we must balance economic expansion with protection of our environment. We must shape, control, channel and direct future growth. More is not necessarily better.

We are working on a system of incentive zoning.

We may extend historic districts to include parts of the city not covered by that legislation.

We want to encourage development rights transfer.

We need new financing mechanisms such as tax incremental financing.

We will continue to work for establishment of a Landmarks Commission, which, incidentally, should pass the legislature this year.

And we should emphasize that not all new buildings must necessarily be large buildings. On the contrary, we should strongly encourage the construction of small, multiple-use buildings.

But most of all, we must do all we can to sell the city, both as a place to live and a place to work.

I'm not talking about mindless promotion that says everything's great and utopia is just around the corner. Rather, I think it calls for a positive attitude towards the city and the realization that day-to-day problems aside, Boston is a strong, vital city. Boston's strengths far outnumber its weaknesses. However, as I've indicated tonight, we are not without problems.

There is, after all, an economic recession in this country.

Boston does have a high tax rate and there must be reforms to ensure that the burden of the property tax is lessened and that the system of assessments is rationalized.

On the other hand, we are a city which has massive redevelopment underway and funds to do more.

There is great interest on the part of developers both from this country and from overseas in Boston investments.

We are one of the few older cities in America which is not losing population and are, in fact, enjoying a modest increase in our population.

Our downtown Waterfront is being transformed.

Our retail district is being rebuilt.

Our historic Markets district is being renewed.

There is 8 million square feet of office space under construction, an amount equal to all the office space built in Boston from 1960-1970.

The dynamics for growth exist in Boston. But I must return to the point I discussed earlier in the evening. We must create a working partnership between the public and

private sector so that we can grow in such a way that provides maximum public benefit. I am not talking of a partnership which comes together in a spirit of boosterism and lasts only until one or two major projects get underway.

I'm talking about a partnership that is founded on mutual respect, a partnership which has as its bond real affection and appreciation for this city.

I'm talking about a partnership that understands that what is best for an individual architectural firm, or a particular developer, is ultimately what is best for the city.

